

A MIDNIGHT TRAGEDY.

The Crime of the Broker's Office.

W. F. MOTT.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

There was a window in the side wall of the interior room which Paxton examined, discovering that it was not secured, although it was provided with interior fastenings of an approved kind. Paxton pushed up the sash and found that the heavy outside shutters with which it was guarded were not fastened—that the hooks had been broken. He saw, moreover, that the window opened upon a narrow passage between that and the next building.

The police sergeant kept close to the detective as though he feared he would make some discovery which might escape his own unaided observation, and he noted all Paxton saw.

It was Mr. Paxton's method never to ask any questions until he had thoroughly examined the scene of a crime, and thus in the first instance his mind was unbiased by what might be told him.

Now having concluded his investigation for the present, he addressed several questions to Marion and Judith Kedge.

"Miss Oakburn, did you hear the report of a pistol or any unusual sound before you discovered your father?" he asked.

"No, sir, I heard nothing, although I have not slept to-night," answered Marion.

"And did you hear nothing?" continued Paxton, turning to Judith Kedge.

"Nothing, sir," she replied.

"When you came to the office, I think you told the policeman that you found the door unlocked?" Paxton went on, now addressing Marion.

"Yes, sir, it was unlocked."

"And the street door?"

Marion turned to Judith.

"That was also unlocked and unbolts, as I found when I went to open it," the woman said.

"Was there any one besides you and this woman in your apartments to-night, Miss Oakburn?"

Marion hesitated for a moment, and then she said:

"Mr. Stuart Harland, a clerk employed by Mr. Garrison, occupied our front room directly over the office."

"But he is not there now, sir. I ran up to his room as soon as we discovered that Mr. Oakburn was murdered. I am sure I don't know what can have become of him, for he went to his room as usual quite late, and as I sleep in a room adjoining his I heard him moving about a few moments before Miss Marion rapped at my door and asked me to go down and look for her father. I noticed when I looked into his room that his traveling-bag was gone," said Judith Kedge.

Marion's face assumed an expression of absolute agony, and she gave Judith Kedge a glance full of aversion and fear.

Mr. Paxton and the police sergeant exchanged significant glances.

"Excuse me a moment," said the detective, and he slipped out of the office. He returned very quickly, for he had only run up to Stuart Harland's apartment and hastily searched it. He discovered nothing except that the bed had not been opened that night.

A short consultation between the detective and the police sergeant ensued, and the latter said:

"You are right, sir. Mr. Garrison should be sent for at once."

Acting upon this decision, he dispatched one of his men to the broker's residence with a hastily written note containing information of the tragedy which had been enacted at his office.

Marion, seemingly exhausted by grief and excitement, had seated herself beside her dead father, and with her face buried in her hands she remained silent and motionless, while Judith Kedge stood by a window and listened eagerly to a conversation which was carried on in low tones between the police sergeant and one of his men.

Judith Kedge did not possess a good face; rather it was one of an awakened distrust in the mind of the observer. She had a low, retreating forehead, large coarse features, thin bloodless lips, and small yellow eyes set close together under beetling brows. Her age was about fifty. Her life had not been cast in pleasant places, and she had grown to hate those who were happy because she was not so. She was envious of all persons who were in the possession of the advantages of life of which fate had deprived her. In disposition she was vindictive and cruel. She was cunning, unscrupulous and daring to a certain degree, and avarice dominated every other passion in her heart.

Just at this moment there were strange thoughts in Judith Kedge's mind. She was plotting seemingly to turn certain secrets of this dreadful murder of murder to her own profit.

Mr. Garrison, the broker, arrived in less than thirty minutes, and he was pale and agitated.

Suspense and anxiety were written upon his features as he burst into the office, and as though oblivious to the presence of anyone rushed to John Oakburn's desk and began to examine a file of cheques which he took from a drawer. His hands trembled while so that he could scarcely hold the papers, and he experienced the keen agony of a gambler to whom the turning of a card or the calling out of a number is almost a matter of life or death, as he ran over the file of cheques.

"He is searching for something of vital importance to his interest," said Paxton, sotto voce.

"Not here! There is one chance left!" exclaimed Jason Garrison, faintly unconscious that he spoke, and turning to a small memorandum book he hurriedly looked over its pages.

The next moment the book fell from his nerveless grasp, and he sank forward as though prostrated by a nervous shock.

"I am a ruined man!" he exclaimed. Paxton quickly sprang to his side.

"You have sustained a serious loss by this robbery, sir?" he asked.

Jason Garrison raised his pale, agitated face, and bringing his clenched fist down upon the desk with force, cried, fiercely:

"I tell you, man, I am ruined. Hopelessly ruined!"

"Then there was a large sum of money in the safe?" asked Paxton.

"Yes, sir."

"I am a detective, and I am sure, my dear sir, that it will be to your interest to conceal nothing from me."

"I have nothing to conceal!" cried Garrison, in a way that in the detective's judgment belied his words. "I will explain, sir," he continued. "Yesterday afternoon I gave my unfortunate cashier, John Oakburn, a cheque for \$75,000, and instructed him to cash it at the bank, and keep the money over night here in our safe, as we were to have an urgent demand for it early in the morning. The sergeant's note informed me that there was no money in the safe, and I find the cheque missing from the file of small cheques where I saw John Oakburn place it. More, in this book I found my cashier's memorandum, which dashed to the ground my one hope that the money was not lost."

Mr. Garrison picked up the book which he had dropped on the floor, and turning the leaves he read the following in John Oakburn's handwriting:

"Dec. 23, cashed cheque for \$75,000 to-day."

"Seventy-eight thousand dollars. A large cheque. But here in the great money center of the country among you brokers, I suppose the amount is not surprising. However, it has been stolen by John Oakburn's murderer. Seventy-eight thousand dollars is quite a haul for a thief, but let us hope that we will recover the stolen money," said Paxton.

"We already have a clue to the assassin," the police sergeant said.

"Whom do you suspect?" asked the broker.

"Let me give you a synopsis of the case, and you can draw your own deductions. The office door was found unlocked. Nothing to be noted in that, since it was probably so left by the cashier when he entered. The street door was also unlocked, and the bolts, which were on the inside, were drawn. The safe was opened by means of John Oakburn's key. A window in the rear office is unfastened. Now, it is clear to my mind that the assassin was an inmate of this house—one who knew the combination of the safe and that there was money in it. He surprised John Oakburn, shot him, took the key from his pocket, opened the safe, secured the money and then unbarred the street door and fled. But our assassin and robber was cunning. He thought he would leave a loophole of doubt in the theory which would be formed of the crime, and so he opened the window in the rear office, pried off the fastening of the shutters and left them so as to give the impression that the assassin might have broken into the office by that route. Now, sir, who among your clerks knew the combination of your safe lock? Who among them knew that \$75,000 was to be left in the safe over night?"

Thus spoke the police sergeant.

He had taken a position in the center of the room, and the broker and the detective in a pompous manner, like some political stump orator. It was clearly evident that he fancied he had the entire case under his thumb.

"Only one person except John Oakburn knew the combination of the safe and that the stolen money was to be kept in it over night, and that person is above suspicion, sir," answered Mr. Garrison.

"His name, if you please?"

"Stuart Harland," answered the broker, and then as the name passed his lips he started, for he suddenly remembered that the young clerk occupied an apartment in the building, so he quickly added: "But Mr. Harland's rooms here and he should have been called."

"He was called, sir, but he failed to respond, because he had fled, and I may as well tell you plainly, sir, though I would spare your feelings, that I entertain a grave suspicion which I am sure is shared by Mr. Paxton."

"What do you mean?" demanded the broker.

"The circumstances seem to indicate that Stuart Harland is John Oakburn's murderer," replied the police sergeant.

At last the direct accusation which Marion Oakburn dreaded, and to prevent which she had besought Judith Kedge to preserve silence regarding the unexplained departure of Stuart Harland, was made.

The police sergeant was responsible for the startling and dreadful arraignment into words, but in the minds of the others present it could scarcely be doubted that the same suspicion had found a lodgment.

It is an age of distrust. No man's past is regarded as a bond for his future. Men whose reputations were spotless yesterday are buried in the mire to-day. The temptation of gold outweighs the honor and honesty of men who until the denouement comes are regarded as above suspicion.

But Jason Garrison would have staked his life upon the innocence and honor of the man to whom he meant to entrust the future happiness of his only child.

As the police sergeant pronounced the name of Stuart Harland the broker leaped to his feet, and cried:

"Never, sir! Never! Do not dare to couple Stuart Harland's name with a crime in my presence," he cried.

"Stuart Harland is as innocent as I am. I know it. I feel it. He is not capable of a dishonest deed," said Marion, earnestly seeking to exculpate the suspected one.

"You see, sir, even the daughter of the victim of this tragedy is assured of the innocence of the man you accuse," said Garrison.

"And permit me to say that you are entirely wrong in thinking that I share your suspicion of Stuart Harland," said Paxton, the detective, smiling blandly.

"Indeed, under the circumstances, I am convinced of his innocence," he added.

The police sergeant seemed amazed at this, and he said to Paxton:

"The circumstances are all against him; it cannot be any one else," he said, defiantly.

"Good, keep on thinking so and work on that line. The way will be clear to enable me to secure the real assassin," said Paxton pleasantly.

"We shall see. I have placed a shrewd man on Harland's track and he will be arrested before morning."

"I wish you joy of your capture, I am sure," retorted Paxton.

Jason Garrison turned his back upon the detective and the police sergeant with an expressive gesture, and strode to the side of the dead man.

Long and earnestly he gazed upon the face of the dead, and the mind of the world was moved as he thought that this poor man, who had served him with surprising fidelity for long years, had perhaps met his fate in defense of his property.

"Poor John, poor John!" he said. "He was one of the few men who are honest from principle alone. He was honored by all, and he leaves behind him a reputation of which any man might well be proud."

Turning to Marion, he added:

"Miss Oakburn, the memory of your father will be respected by all who knew him. He died as he had lived—faithful to his duty and an honest man."

The dead cashier's daughter was strangely agitated, but her face became transformed with a look of heroic resolve as she said:

"My father so loved that when he was dead men might speak of him as you have done. His soul would have revolved at any other destiny. His memory shall be revered."

There was something fierce and startling in the intensity of the girl's voice, and her manner was that of one in a strangely excited mental state.

But her hearers, with perhaps one exception, attributed her excitement and her strange manner to emotions occasioned by the death of her father.

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"And I am in this villain's power. Pratt and Weeks have deceived me, set traps for me and involved me in speculations which were swindles concocted with the cunning of arch-fiends to evade all legal consequences. These men find their victims among the oldest operators on the street, and my experience did not save me," he added.

"But the stolen money may be recovered," he said.

"Do not rest on anybody?" asked Edna. Her father hesitated.

"Speak, father. Why do you seem so agitated?" she said.

"I would spare you pain and anxiety. The worst for you, my child, is yet to come."

"I do not comprehend; what do you mean?"

In a few words he told of the suspicion which the police sergeant had declared against Stuart Harland.

Edna was justly indignant and she treated the accusation with scorn.

"Stuart will explain the cause of his midnight departure. When he is heard, a shadow of suspicion will not remain upon him," she said, with a loving woman's sublime faith.

"I should tell you also that Paxton, the detective, did not agree with the police sergeant. In the face of all the circumstances which caused the sergeant to suspect Stuart, he declared his belief in the young man's innocence. Paxton is a shadow of suspicion will not remain upon him," she said, with a loving woman's sublime faith.

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